DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 381 IR 051 722

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TITLE Overdue Materials: Causes and Corrections.
PUB DATE Aug 86
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Fines (Penalties); Library Administration; *Library Circulation; Library Facilities; *Library Materials; *Library Planning; Library Research; Policy Formation; Publicity; Public Libraries; Public Relations; *Users (Information); Use Studies
IDENTIFIERS Book Losses; Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library System; *Overdue Books

ABSTRACT

This discussion of ways to solve the problem of overdue library materials reviews three pertinent articles from the library literature, several studies of the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Library system, and a 1985 study at a southwestern public library. Attempted solutions are cited, including fines, overdue notices, retrieval methods such as the employment of collection agencies, and planning programs taking into consideration the relationship of the physical accessibility of the library to the residential address of the borrower. A brief summary of approaches to reducing the problem of overdue library materials evaluates the following alternatives: (1) per-day and maximum fines; (2) written/printed notices; (3) legal action; (4) restriction of borrowing and other library use privileges; (5) billing for the money value owed to the library; (6) use of collection agencies; (7) establishment of a maximum anticipated loss rate; (8) analysis of frequency of library use by borrowers; (9) mass media publicity; (10) examination of loan policy for categories of materials chronically not returned; (11) reassessment of the purpose of loan periods; (12) implications of unreturned materials for library planning; and (13) information that should be provided to borrowers. Statistical data are presented in four tables, and references are provided. (KM)

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ED277381

OVERDUE MATERIALS

CAUSES AND CORRECTIONS

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August, 1986

IR051722

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The problem of materials overdue from circulation continues to plague libraries. Hard economic times for many libraries in the last few years have brought even more attention to the problem.

A review of library literature found that there have been a number of publications concerning retrieving overdues in recent years. Close examination revealed that the majority of these were brief news articles. Most of them did not provide enough research evidence or background documentation to assist another library to decide if the activities reported had merit for their library. The following exceptions were noted: More Hard Facts on Overdues by Robert Burgin and Patty Hansel; To Due or Not to Due, by Jim Broussard and Library Fines Evaluated by Robert S. Meyer. Some findings from these sources are included here.

Findings from several studies at the Metropolitan Library System (Oklahoma City) and a 1985 study at a southwestern public library serving a community of over 200,000 persons that were conducted by the author and others are included. Metropolitan (MLS) serves approximately 603,000 persons.

Burgin and Hansel[1] conducted a study of 89 public libraries regarding current overdue materials retrieval activities. Their study found that the following activities were associated with reduced overdue rates at the points in time shown.

Last Date (Date Due) - Charge 10 cents per day in fines; Restrict patrons with overdues; Automate circulation; Don't renew books; Use a collection agency; Loan books for at least 28 days; Charge fines per overdue notice sent; Send the first notice within 15 days.
6 Weeks to 8 Weeks (after due date) - Charge fines; Restrict patrons with overdues; Send four or more notices; Send the first notice within 15 days; Make the final notice a bill.
8 Weeks (after due date) - Loan books for at least 28 days.
4 Months (after due date) - Restrict patrons with overdues; Make the final notice a bill; Loan books for at least 28 days or loan books for fewer than 15 days.
1 Year - Restrict patrons with overdues.

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[1]Robert Burgin and Patsy Hansel. "More Hard Facts on Overdues", Library and Archival Security, Summer/Fall 1984, pp.5-16.

In analyzing the Burgin and Hansel findings, these factors were found:

1. The recommendation to send four or more notices is based on the records of two libraries.

2. The retrieval record of libraries surveyed who renewed books was better at the end of one year than those who did not renew (1.12 percent of circulation as opposed to 1.74 percent).

3. Those libraries (12) who reported that they take patrons with overdue materials to court reported poorer return rates of materials than those that did not go to court (49). This may have been influenced by mostly libraries with higher non-return rates resorting to court actions.

4. The recommendation to use a collection agency was based on results from only one library.

Jim Broussard[2] surveyed 22 circulation librarians at Louisiana colleges and universities. His major alternatives that resulted can have significance for public libraries as well:

1. Operate on the premise that a portion of the books that are borrowed will never be returned.

2. Avoid arguments with the borrower, if possible.

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[2]Jim Broussard. "To Due or Not to Due", LLA Bulletin, Louisianna Library Association, Winter 1980, pp.54-57.

Other articles essentially reported efforts to modify fines or overdue notices or attempting other retrieval methods. Several libraries reported sending library staff to private homes to confront the delinquent borrowers and retrieve the overdue materials. A few filed criminal charges against delinquent borrowers. Others engaged credit collection agencies, started sending overdue notices as a Western Union Mailgram, conducted "fine free" amnesty days for return of all overdue materials, filed claims against delinquent borrowers in small claims courts, and offered rewards for returning books. Several libraries stated that they were widely publicizing the fact that the library intended to take legal action against delinquent borrowers and found that the publicity caused such an upsurge in the return of materials that the threat of action was all that seemed to be required.

In 1973 the Metropolitan Library System revised its maximum fine from purchase cost of the overdue materials to $1.50 per overdue item, regardless of how long overdue the materials might be. Almost immediately, the library system experienced an increase in the dollar value of fines collected and a decrease in the problem of the number of overdue materials.

A comprehensive study was begun at MLS in 1981 to determine what additional steps, if any, should be attempted to improve the overall retrieval rate of loaned materials. The first step in the project is shown in Table One, an analysis of overdue materials and borrowers from 1975 to the middle of 1981. In working with local attorneys, credit collection and reporting agencies, library staff, court and police officials it was decided that the most immediate and possible effective step was use of a credit collection agency.

During this process it was found that the largest category of overdues ($1-$30 in Table One) contained 64 percent of the dollar value of all overdue materials and 89 percent of all the borrowers who held such materials. Yet this is the category that both local and national collection agencies contacted had stated were not economically feasible for them to handle.

During 1983 MLS engaged a national credit collection firm that uses only mail

collection and guarantees its results. Before beginning the contract with the collection agency, the library system, for the first time, officially billed 540 patrons for the dollar value of the materials overdue between six months and two years. The persons all owed a minimum of $40 for materials not yet returned. The library system collected a combined total of $2,068.76 in cash payments and returned materials as a result of this one-time action.

In October, 1983 the library system turned over 100 accounts that totaled between $40 and $60 each and 100 accounts of more than $60 each to the credit collection agency. The total cost to the library in collection fees was guaranteed at a maximum of $1,875, and the collection agency guaranteed to collect 300% of that cost in repayments or returned materials. In December, 1984 the library system closed this project. The collection agency and its methods proved effective with the group of persons owing $40 to $60 per person. They had guaranteed to collect $1,875 from this group and had collected a total of $2,075.51 in December. However, their success had been limited with persons owing $60 and over per person. The agency had guaranteed to collect $3,750 and had only collected $1,981.68.

TABLE ONE

OVERDUE MATERIALS ANALYSIS

Year	Purchase Value $1 - 30 Number Patrons	Number Volumes	$ Value	Purchase Value $31 - 75 Number Patrons	Number Volumes	$ Value
1975	1,023	1,876	11,349.97	4	502	3,528.05
1976	2,822	5,004	31,383,83	258	1,595	11,153.75
1977	3,106	6,380	33,909.81	299	1,766	13,240.60
1978	3,414	6,193	39,225.68	363	2,014	15,682.07
1979	3,591	6,561	42,523.10	427	2,428	18,777.10
1980	4,290	7,333	49,761.64	544	2,933	23,795.20
1981	2,289	3,804	25,613.24	235	1,247	10,100.05
TOTALS	20,445	36,231	$233,786.27	2,210	12,485	$96,284.82

Year	Purchase Value $76 - 110 Number Patrons	Number Volumes	$ Value	Purchase Value $111 - + Number Patrons	Number Volumes	$ Value
1975	7	76	692.56	3	59	544.52
1976	25	285	2,208.95	8	150	1,220.06
1977	29	314	2,595.97	9	191	1,626.81
1978	35	426	3,215.79	13	295	2,330.53
1979	45	427	3,961.69	15	183	2,203.94
1980	49	484	4,406.53	17	316	2,947.05
1981	28	273	2,556.20	15	198	2,064.63
TOTALS	218	2,285	$19,637.77	80	1,392	$12,945.54

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

The previously reported activities in retrieving overdue materials dealt, for the most part, with the symptoms of overdue materials and not with potential sources of the problem. The physical accessibility of the library to the residential address of the borrower appears to have a bearing on the return of borrowed materials. In a study conducted by the author in late 1985, in a southwestern library system serving a population of over 200,000 persons, the library users and recent losses in circulation were studied concurrently. The library system operates five libraries.

The analysis of unreturned materials from circulation dealt with the 1983-1984 fiscal year and reported a loss experience as of July-August, 1985, or approximately one year after lending due dates. The lost-in-circulation record reflected credit for materials that had been returned and reinstated after being initially declared lost. The percentage of 1983-1984 circulation still found missing, by libraries, is indicated in Table Two.

TABLE TWO

LIBRARY	PERCENTAGE OF 1983-1984 CIRCULATION UNRETURNED
A	2.42
B	2.17
C	1.01
D	.90
E	.80

Library A was found to have drawn users from every zip code area of the library system service area. Library B drew users from the next largest number of zip

codes, library C from the third largest and libraries D and E essentially drew their users from the zip codes in which they were located. There is a pattern of declining losses of materials in circulation as libraries draw users more from their immediate residential community than from more distant residential locations.

An analysis of circulation losses, borrowers and libraries was recently completed in Oklahoma City at the Metropolitan Library System, including three surveys of library users conducted during three different seasons of 1983-1984. The circulation was for the official 1983-1984 fiscal year of the library system that ended June 30, 1984. The loss rate was determined by reports indicating the gross number of materials unreturned six months after due dates less the number of materials that had been returned and reinstated that were due in the time period. The rate of nonreturn shown in this study, at six months overdue, is higher than the official rate used by the library system at the end of one year or later. This is due to the fact that, after one year, a significant number of additional materials are returned by borrowers, lost materials are located that previously had been improperly shelved in libraries or that library staff had failed to properly clear from borrowers records, and materials are otherwise found.

In Table Three the MLS libraries are organized according to their nonreturn rates, ranging from number one with the smallest loss rate to number eleven with the largest. Factors included in the user surveys were searched for positive relationship to the pattern of unreturned materials found. These factors included demographic patterns, library use patterns, reasons for using the libraries, opinions of librarians, etc. The factors found that displayed the most consistent relevancy to rates of return of materials were related to accessibility of the library to the residence of the borrower. Essentially, it was indicated that the more a library is used because it is convenient to the residence of the borrower, the more likely the borrowers are to return borrowed materials.

TABLE THREE

Library Number	A Percentage of 1983-1984 Total Circulation Unreturned After 6 Months	B Percentage of Users Who Used Library Because Close to Home	C Percentage of Users Who Took 1-5 Minutes to Travel to Library Used	D Percentage of Users Who Used Library Because Close to Job
One	.91	86	39	12
Two	1.12	78	44	12
Three	1.12	81	36	8
Four	1.12	90	49	4
Five	1.14	63	29	17
Six	1.22	72	37	12
Seven	1.23	78	43	15
Eight	1.29	84	39	5
Nine	2.67	62	28	17
Ten	3.86	21	29	44
Eleven	8.23	72	34	22

Note: Median cases are underlined in each column.

The recent studies in Oklahoma City (see Table Three) and the one other major southwestern city previously mentioned both identify the following trends.

Factors	Higher Nonreturn Rates	Lower Nonreturn Rates
Use of library due to convenience of library to residence of user		XX
Use of library due to convenience of library to place of employment	XX	
Users travel 5 minutes or less to reach the library		XX
Users travel 6 minutes or more to reach the library	XX	
Users come from entire City	XX	
Users come from immediate neighborhood		XX

Analysis of the 1983-1984 fiscal year loss of materials through circulation by types of materials in Oklahoma City is shown in Table Four. This table reflects the various major parts of the materials collection that were selected for analysis. The eleven individual full-service libraries of the system are included. The order in which the libraries are listed here relate to subsequent analyses that are reported.

The categories of materials included in the analysis in Table Four were selected to reflect the major parts of the materials collection in inventory size, borrowing use and different types of materials. The Adult fiction category does not include such categories as mysteries, science fiction and new books. Juvenile fiction does not include books written for youngsters under ten years old.

The major points to be gained from Table Four are the varying rates of return from circulation of the major types of materials and the conditions of lending that are involved with them. All of the categories listed received the same circulation and overdue notification procedures except the uncataloged adult paperbacks. No fines are charged for overdue uncataloged paperbacks, and overdue notices do not

provide the author or title of such paperbacks.

The same general pattern of Table Four was found in the previously mentioned study of another southwestern library system. It is reasonable to assume that other libraries will find some similar patterns. These trends pose interesting possibilities concerning planning of library facility locations, library services and materials collections.

TABLE FOUR

NET PERCENTAGE OF MATERIALS LOANED
THAT WERE UNRETURNED AT SIX MONTHS
AFTER DATE DUE

Library Number	Adult Nonfiction	Adult Fiction	Adult Cataloged	Juvenile Fiction	Easy & Readers	Juvenile Cataloged	Adult Uncataloged Paperback	Total Collection
Five	1.60	.68	1.14	.34	.46	.45	1.80	1.14
Two	2.80	.64	1.40	.65	.54	.42	1.30	1.12
Nine	3.80	2.20	2.80	4.30	1.70	2.08	2.63	2.67
Six	2.07	.69	1.38	.58	.67	.66	1.73	1.22
Ten	4.80	1.14	3.99	3.17	2.39	2.62	5.82	3.86
One	1.23	.26	.90	.56	.26	.30	1.76	.91
Eight	2.11	.96	1.47	1.58	.58	.72	1.40	1.29
Eleven	8.67	3.21	8.02	4.79	7.76	7.35	11.16	8.23
Three	2.70	.98	1.95	1.35	.52	.65	1.39	1.12
Four	1.43	.98	1.03	.57	.62	.61	1.49	1.12
Seven	1.69	1.01	1.42	.64	.28	.37	1.89	1.23
Library System	2.37	.85	1.75	.94	.60	.67	1.90	1.54

SUMMARY

1. The evidence does indicate that the charging of stiff fines per day overdue (and stiff should be defined by local conditions) can have a positive effect in causing materials to be returned on time or four weeks late or less. The evidence also indicates, however, that stiff maximum fines can inhibit persons from returning materials that are more than four weeks overdue. Rather than pay as much as the cost of the book in fines, for example, borrowers may opt to not return the materials.

2. Written/Printed Notices.

A. It is likely that, within some undefined limits, the more overdue notices that are sent to borrowers, the better the return rate of overdue materials will be. However, effectiveness of these notices appears to decline sharply within a short period of time after the due date and with each subsequent notice. The library is always faced with the costs of sending and administering multiple notices as another limiting factor.

B. The first notice is more effective if it is sent within 15 days of the date due and is more effective than subsequent notices that may be sent.

C. At least one notice should be in the form of a printed formal bill for the cash value owed for unreturned materials.

3. The limited evidence does not substantiate that legal actions, such as regularly taking persons to court for overdue materials or having collectors visit such borrowers at home, have general long-term value as a constant practice. These actions may have public awareness value as infrequent publicity

events to encourage other borrowers to return their overdue materials.

4. Restricting the borrowing and other library use privileges of persons who have not returned borrowed materials appears to be one of the most effective tools, short-term and long-term, in retrieving borrowed materials.

5. The experience of the Metropolitan Library System and others indicates that sending at least one bill for the money value owed to the library is effective. The bill(s) can be in lieu of an overdue notice.

6. Collection agencies may be effective within limits. Some of the limits probably will vary with local conditions, such as the minimum size bill that an agency finds cost-effective for them to attempt collection or relevant laws.

Major factors found in the Oklahoma City experience were:

A. The local and national agents insisted that the library send a bill for money owed before beginning collection efforts.

B. The local and national agents would not handle bills older than three years. Both preferred to have an account turned over to them as early as possible; their experiences indicated that newer accounts are easier to collect.

C. The agents may not be willing to handle smaller accounts. Metropolitan found that the national agent would handle nothing less than $40 accounts, and the local agent would handle nothing smaller than $50 accounts.

D. Effectiveness of the collection agent may be limited to certain types

of accounts. Metropolitan found that the collection agent was effective with the $40 to $60 accounts but that it had marginal success with the accounts over $60.

7. At some point further reduction of the problem of unreturned materials lies in adjustments of libraries' policies and practices relating to materials circulation. A first step can be establishing a realistic level of local losses that is acceptable to library administration as a "cost of doing business."

A maximum anticipated loss rate that is practical within the realities of the individual community and the local library should be adopted. A certain level of losses should be projected and reflected in annual materials budgets and other planning. All books and other materials available for unsupervised use by the public should be regarded as short-term, depreciable investments for public libraries.

8. The frequency of use of the library by borrowers may well be a contributing factor to their return or nonreturn of materials. A computerized study of the Metropolitan Library System in Oklahoma City of borrowing by all borrowers for a three year period, 1975 to 1978, was conducted. The study was conducted in early 1978 by the MLS head of data processing, the author, and the Community Analysis Institute (Dr. Roger Greer and Martha Hale). This study was previously reported by Martha Hale: Hale, Martha, "Community Analysis: A Tool for Public Relations." Show-Me Libraries (January, 1980): 6-10.

In this analysis, borrowers from libraries number Nine, Ten and Eleven were found to visit libraries less frequently than borrowers at the other eight libraries in the library system. This factor could easily be related to the finding in September, 1985 that these libraries have the three largest percentages of borrowers using the libraries because they were close to work,

more travel time was required to visit them than other libraries, fewer borrowers used these because they were close to the residence of the borrowers than was true for the other libraries, and these three had the highest rates of nonreturn of materials.

9. Using mass media publicity to draw occasional attention to the problem of overdue materials seems to help retrieve materials. Occasional publicizing of "possible" legal actions against holders of overdue materials can have positive benefits. Publicized other special events seem to have a similar effect.

10. Categories of materials that are chronically not returned might be approached in several ways, including the following:

*Variations in loan periods;

*Policies regarding loan renewals;

*Special loan policies/procedures.

More flexible, generous loan periods and loan renewals for categories or types of materials that are found to be chronically returned late or not returned at all should be considered.

11. The library should decide the major purpose of its loan period(s). A shorter loan period will probably cause more materials to be returned on time but more of them to ultimately never be returned. Longer loan periods may have the opposite effect.

12. The realities of unreturned materials should be taken into consideration when planning library services and facilities. Libraries should recognize that there are probably trade-offs in most planning decisions. For example:

*Fewer library locations and longer traveling time for borrowers to reach them will likely result in higher nonreturn rates;

*Emphasis of lending high-risk category materials will likely result in higher nonreturn rates;

*Punitive high fine rates, shorter loan periods likely result in higher nonreturn rates in the long-run analysis;

*Infrequent borrowers may be less likely to return materials than those who borrow frequently.

The term, "infrequent borrower," should be defined at the local level, based on actual experiences of the library, and perhaps should be dealt with operationally as a "less frequent" borrower at the local level. This factor is one that deserves more study to achieve precision regarding what types of materials they borrow, reasons for borrowing, individual characteristics, and so forth.

13. Borrowers should be frequently informed of library circulation policies, loan periods, location of library facilities, operating hours of facilities and other related items. Such advisement could be a positive public relations/publicity marketing tool by including information about current library events and programs. The information could be provided in a number of ways.

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